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SUBJECT: SPO-OVP CLASH OVER PLANNED ASYLUM CENTER

REF: A) 09 VIENNA 1593
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VIENNA 00000027 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Interior Minister Fekter (conservative People's Party - OVP) has come under heavy criticism since her late December announcement of a plan to build an asylum center in Burgenland Province. Burgenland Governor Hans Niessl (Social Democrat Party - SPO), who faces provincial elections in May, complained that he had not been informed of the plan, and has vowed to block the center. Chancellor Faymann (SPO) has proposed that a referendum be held in any community where an asylum center is planned. Vice Chancellor Proell (OVP) has rejected referenda as a solution and called for a compromise between the two coalition parties. This is not the first time that Fekter has announced a major initiative without first laying the groundwork, and she is also under criticism from within her own party. End Summary.

A Surprise Announcement

¶2. (U) On December 19, Fekter announced plans for a third asylum center in Austria to handle initial processing of applicants. The new facility, Fekter said, would be built in Eberau in southern Burgenland Province. Fekter had negotiated the location with the OVP Mayor of Eberau, who viewed the project as an opportunity to create employment and improve the infrastructure of the town, a village with fewer than 1,000 residents on the Hungarian border. The SPO and OVP had agreed in their governing coalition pact to establish a third center "in the south of Austria," to relieve the burden on the existing facilities in Traiskirchen, Lower Austria, and Thalham, Upper Austria.

Opposition Mounts

¶3. (U) However, provincial and national political leaders were taken by surprise by Fekter's announcement, and a number of them quickly opposed it. Burgenland Governor Hans Niessl, facing elections in May, complained that he had not been informed about the plan, and vowed to block the project. Niessl called for a referendum in Eberau on the center, which has now been scheduled for March 21. Chancellor Faymann (SPO) averred that a "binding" referendum should be held in any community where an asylum center is planned. Faymann has also claimed that when the coalition parties agreed to build a facility in the "south," it was understood that this would mean Carinthia Province. Predictably, political figures in Carinthia - where anti-immigrant sentiment is particularly strong -- angrily rejected the idea.

¶4. (U) OVP leaders in Burgenland now say they oppose the plan, fearing that public opposition will harm their chances at the polls. Burgenland OVP Chairman Franz Steindl has harshly criticized Fekter's handling of the issue in press interviews, and even the Eberau Mayor has changed his position and come out against the facility.

Proell Seeks Compromise

¶5. (U) Vice Chancellor Proell (OVP) has attempted to seek a compromise over the issue. Proell has dismissed Faymann's idea of resolving the matter through public referenda, arguing that the government needs to make a decision and take responsibility for it. He has directed Fekter to work with Defense Minister Darabos (SPO), who also serves as his party's integration spokesman, to examine alternative locations. Fekter reportedly has a list of several communities where local officials have expressed an interest in accommodating an asylum center.

¶6. (U) Darabos has argued that a third asylum center would not be necessary if all nine provinces accepted their share of asylum applicants in accordance with the existing non-binding agreement between the Federal Government and the provinces, a standard which only two provinces - Vienna and Upper Austria - now meet. President Fischer - widely respected as rational and above politics - appeared to reject that argument when he urged the government to make a second effort to find a location for the facility.

Comment: Fekter, Faymann Add to Farce

¶7. (SBU) Several factors have given this debate a bizarre and somewhat farcical quality: Interior Minister Fekter has a habit of announcing political initiatives without laying the proper groundwork. Her December announcement of a national integration plan (reftel A) drew similar blowback from SPO leaders and others who maintained that the plan was not fully developed and had not been agreed upon by the relevant parties. Faymann also did his part to complicate the asylum center debate with his implausible proposal to hold referenda, an idea that would likely impede the construction of an asylum center anywhere in Austria. Lastly, the provincial

VIENNA 00000027 002.2 OF 002

election calendar has added to the political static. Fekter's surprise announcement was a gift to Burgenland Governor Niessl, who now has a ready-made issue to launch his campaign with. It is likely that the Government will find a suitable location for a new asylum center, but not until the debate cools down.

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